



Changing Consumer Behaviour during the Pandemic in India: The New Normal

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Abstract

Pandemics have wrecked the history of humanity throughout and sometimes marked the beginning of significant changes. As reports of Covid-19 spread through markets, governments of different countries prepared for the worst. The Indian Government also announced lockdown as a common solution with various levels and restrictions. For a long time, e-commerce was last resort of offline retail. But this Lockdown has given an impetus where online consumption will no longer be synonymous with status and convenience, but rather a need and pattern of purchase. The study attempts to examine the purchase behavior all through the lockdown, divided into 3 phases according to the consecutive lockdown announced in India. The study concentrates on the areas of quantity, quality, income levels, online platforms for purchases. The study has been conducted over 233 respondents from different parts of India through online questionnaire circulated using convenience sampling technique. The results of the study projects that the panic levels of consumers and their online purchases are negatively related. This can be also a projection of their awareness about the coronavirus. Moreover, the consumers were not willing to compromise on the quality or increase the quantity of purchases during lockdown and even after that. This study provides an insight on the shift in the consumer choices and attitudes under unfavorable marketing conditions and also introduces a new theory on "Theory of panic buying". Marketers, suppliers and retailers can frame strategies based on the information as this marks the new era of e-commerce.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Covid-19, Lockdown, Panic, E-commerce

JEL Classification: D12, L81

Paper Classification: Research Paper

Introduction

The history of human coronaviruses began in 1965 when the virus was categorized as one causing severe respiratory diseases (D A Tyrrell, 1966). Five new coronaviruses were identified over five decades, and this time the virus has brought the whole world to a standstill. This time the virus has not only impacted the health sector, but has seriously impacted the economy. The world is not new to a pandemic, but with globalization, it has severely hit the market. Any social change, good or ill will transform social institutions and organizations (Sorokin 1942). In 1918

when the great influenza pandemic struck the world, it was considered the greatest epidemic of all times. The countries affected had the major share in the world's GDP and research has found that the 1918-20 Great Influenza Pandemic had a macroeconomic impact world-wide (Barro, 2020) management on a global scale (Haleem, 2020)

As the specific vaccines for Covid-19 were yet to be found, lockdown was seen as the most effective way to curb the spread of the virus. Lockdown aimed at reducing the graph by social distancing. People were requested to stay at home. Schools and colleges were closed, work from home option was given to employees (Shah et al. 2020). This compelled people to go out only for essential activities. Thus, Covid-19 caused a drastic change in the consumption pattern.

The term 'lockdown' creates a psychological fear that stops consumer from spending (Mehta, 2020). 'Janta curfew' marked the first initiative towards lockdown and was accepted by all with equal fanfare. But when the actual lockdown happened, people panicked for the lack of preparation. "The Prime minister of India announced the nationwide lockdown for 21 days, limiting movement of the entire 1.3 billion population as a preventive measure against the Covid-19 pandemic giving Indians a less than four-hour notice" (Schultz, 2020)

Initial weeks of lockdown witnessed panic buying fearing restrictions that could further be imposed (*ET Bureau report*, 2020). The term 'essentials' was misunderstood and misinterpreted. Markets were closed, food delivery trucks were halted at the checkpoints, milk vans were sent back, workers were not allowed in factories and mandis. All this led to shortage of essentials and an unprecedented rise in the price of goods. Though after 2-3 days the Government did announce that all the essential good were available. Yet the production, storage, transportation and delivery management still remained a problem (Ahmad, 2020)

As the lockdown became stricter, period got extended from lockdown 1-5, each of 21 days which started in the month of March 2020. People started accepting the new norms, and a gradual shift was seen in their buying pattern. With a gradual decrease in panic levels, a shift could be felt towards online shopping. As per the Metro Cash & Carry India MD and CEO Arvind Mediratta in his interview to Economic Times told that "Initially, customers were unsure of what the trickle-down effect of the lockdown would be. Consumers started becoming vigilant and began hoarding essential commodities. There was a sense of panic." But currently, there is less panic buying and more need base buying. This is because gradually, everyone was made aware that all essential products will continue to be available, there will not be shortage.

Consumers tend to purchase in unusually large quantities in anticipation of a unavailability or price rise due to a fear of an approaching disaster. With the lockdown, there was hysteria on travelling, unlike the previous epidemics in history, instilling fear among the consumers. As stated in Cambridge dictionary, panic buying is "a situation in which many people suddenly buy as much food, fuel, etc. as they can because they are worried about something bad that may happen". The vast majority of those food purchase is also due to closure of restaurants, cafés, bars, and hotels also people are working from home (Hobbs, 2020).

Though for Indians, e-commerce was is not new, but the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a scenario where consumers prefer to shop for basic necessities and groceries online (Krishna, 2020). The comfort of feel, touch, taste and buy was replaced by concerns of safety and hygiene. As per the statistics 52% of consumers avoided going to brick and mortar shops , furthermore 36% are reluctant to visit the shop till a vaccine is developed. (Anam Bhatti, 2020).

Indian Government and health workers have joined hands together to fight against the

pandemic. In order to contain the spread of the virus, citizens should also adhere to the guidelines of social distancing and containment zones (Pal & Yadav, 2020). People were aware of the pandemic and social distancing norms, but due to mental or political pressures imposed, resistance to restrictions are seen to be rising. Therefore, effective strategic management is to be employed to curb and restrict the spread of the virus.

This paper aims to study as to how a consumer reacts in a situation of the epidemic, where there are impending threats of supply chain disruption, income shocks and an undefined uncertainty. The coronavirus hit the world in December 2019, but critical impacts started appearing in India after February 2020. By the time the Indian Government announced the first lockdown, people had become aware of the potential destruction the virus was causing. As people remain in isolation or social distancing, extended periods of quarantine can cause new forms of consumer demand (Cohen, 2020). Therefore, people started to stock goods, went overboard from their budget and diversified from their regular consumption decisions.

Literature review

Lockdown and its effects on the market

India is a mix of both urban and rural population. The epicentre in the initial stages was the major metro and big urban centre. But both the rural and urban sectors face a traumatized situation (Mallick, 2020). At brick-and-mortar locations, food and essential supplies were going out of stock as panic buying continued, putting pressure on grocers to optimize their existing systems rapidly. To meet the challenge, while creating safe environments for customers and employees (Onorato, 2020)

Panic buying of FMCG goods also took place, and everyone started buying goods in huge quantities to store the goods for more than a month. (Chaudhary, 2020). In this scenario, rumours are common to spurt anxiety among individuals. As the future is very uncertain, consumers are more likely to panic, making them insecure. Rumours about a national lockdown in the United States fuelled panic buying of groceries and paper products, which disrupted the supply chain and exacerbated demand-supply gaps and food insecurity among individuals with low socio-economic status and other vulnerable populations (Spencer, 2020)

The pandemic and the lockdown which followed effected both production and distribution. It also effected the consumer willingness and mode of purchase from direct retail shops or e-commerce websites. E-commerce forms only a small portion of retail sales, in spite of people adopting it during the pandemic. This may be because of sudden drop in income experienced (Hojin Jung, 2016).

Consumer behaviour during the pandemic

Previous research on pandemic has always focused on health condition or its impact on the economy. Consumer behaviour has received very little or no attention. The pandemic has created a sense of insecurity. During natural calamity like earthquakes, hurricanes, or global pandemic like Covid-19 consumers behave in the least predictable ways (Sheth, 2020). We should prepare with a resilient mindset even if it does not come naturally (Egli, 2013). Thus the change has to be studied to reshape a resilient consumer behaviour.

The recent spike in demand during pandemic was short-lived as the marketing channels were responsive (Cranfield, 2020). But due to physical distancing in the agriculture labour market

and production practises food prices were rising. The new routine of lockdown will impact the opportunity cost of time and also lead to new food behaviour. Even substituting behaviour was seen due to irregular income. But the paper has offered only casual observation with no analysis (Cranfield, 2020).

One way people try to reduce their chances of catching the virus is by decreasing the frequency of going to the grocery store. Some consumers are resorting to stockpiling water and food. (Conway, 2020). The hoarding behaviour of people affects the quantity of stock in-store. (Bhaumik, 2020). Also, the quantity increased due to the restriction on going to restaurants; consequently people started buying more groceries and cooking at home (Castro, 2020).

Consumers initially concentrated on stockpiling as their intention was to just ensure sufficient goods at home during the unstable period. The retail shops were an unsecured mode of purchase considering the safety measures. They eventually shifted to a more secure and unusual mode of purchase, the online platforms. The shift in the consumer behaviour can be explained from the 'theory of planned behaviour' which says the individuals intended behaviour is controlled by the attitude, subject norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1985)

Hurdles in India's battle against Covid-19 remains its population density and socio-economic conditions of common people. For the Government and health workers the decreased mortality rates is an encouragement (Pal & Yadav, 2020). The arrangements made by the authorities include, multiplied production of Covid-19 kits by more than one manufacturer and satisfactory rates of testing. Considering all the measures undertaken by the authorities, it is also significant to apprehend the social resilience requirements by the people (Bhattacharya, Banerjee, & Rao, 2020)"given": "Prama", "non-dropping-particle": "", "parse-names": false, "suffix": "", {"dropping-particle": "", "family": "Banerjee", "given": "Debanjan", "non-dropping-particle": "", "parse-names": false, "suffix": ""}, {"dropping-particle": "", "family": "Rao", "given": "T S Sathyanarayana", "non-dropping-particle": "", "parse-names": false, "suffix": ""}], "container-title": "Indian Journal of Psychological Medicin", "id": "ITEM-1", "issue": "4", "issued": {"date-parts": [{"2020}]}, "title": "The " Untold " Side of COVID-19 : Social Stigma and Its Consequences in India", "type": "article-journal", "volume": "42", "uris": [{"http": "/www.mendeley.com/documents/?uuid=33dbc354-01ab-49f3-9ed8-bd089ad69821"}]}, "mendeley": {"formattedCitation": "(Bhattacharya, Banerjee, & Rao, 2020. Epidemic is such a situation that unites people irrespective of economic, political or social barriers. Therefore, the need of the hour is the improved levels of awareness in people in dealing with the scenario.

Effect on income due to pandemic

The world has survived different pandemic attacks including SARS, H1N1, yet Covid-19 is the scariest of the lot since no vaccine has been found even after 9-10months since its occurrence in China. This can have an impact on the household budgets, socio-economic condition, preferences and priorities of consumers, price levels and consumer behaviour (Hamilton, 2019). Out of which the price levels and family expenditure direct the consumer behaviour. The budgets had initially expanded fearing lack of stock availability and price hike. Credit card usage was highest in the retail sector contributing to increased sales (Baker et al. 2020). But gradually spending decrease was identified, which may be because of loss of job during the pandemic, health issues or change in consumption patterns (Andersen et al.).

Shift towards online purchase

The brick and mortar shops, once a haven for shoppers, is now a war zone between people and

the virus (Mazur, 2020). More consumers are cautious about making purchases, especially in public places like malls and brick-and-mortar stores. (Kats, 2020). They are using e-commerce to purchase products that they usually would find in a store. (Conway, 2020). Due the compulsion to change the consumers are progressively moving towards online shopping (Jhamb,2020; Reddy,2020) and there has been a 10% growth in customer base during the pandemic (Arora, 2020).

Many researchers have studied the effect of pandemic only on the economy, panic buying by casual observations or limited data. However, little concentration was placed on analysing the effect of pandemic on shopping behaviour of people and how a panic situation as one like lockdown, converts into a normal lifestyle. With this study policymakers will be able to design a plan for lockdowns and help to mitigate the panic buying behaviors in case of future pandemics.

Theoretical Framework

Humans like being control of the situations around them. If they sense that, they are not in control or are unsure of the future outcomes they try to compensate this condition through their consumption pattern. They try to get control over the micro conditions at home, if the macro conditions outside are out of their control (Corder, 2020). They try to stock up the goods, keep their pantries full which gives them a feeling of safety and assurance that everything is in their control.

The Maslow's psychological theory best explains the needs and wants of human behaviour. Analysing the theory during the pandemic of Covid-19, it can be understood that in a state of panic, people emphasis on the bottom needs in the hierarchy – physiological needs and safety needs. The physiological needs include food, water and shelter and the safety needs include personal security, employment, health property, etc. Consumers purchase more products falling in these categories. Increased spending on meeting the physiological and safety needs confirmed stockpiling behaviour in individuals (Hall, Prayag, Fieger, & Dyason, 2020). The theory fails to describe the panic nature of the consumers amidst a crisis which makes them stock up things.

People were anxious, irritable, depressed and feared H1N1, Ebola virus, SARS, that had a world-wide impact. One phenomenon that was brought to notice during the Covid-19 pandemic was the panic buying in every countries. Panic buying is typically a herd behaviour. People tend to follow what others are doing. Panic buying could be a result of combination of factors that affects the decision making capability of individuals. It could be their desire to sustain their regular lives, ensure safety of oneself and family members or could be the outcome of social pressures and fears (Sim, Chua, Vieta, & Fernandez, 2020). Panic buying can lead to stocking a certain commodity resulting in shortages regardless of whether there is actual shortage or perceived shortage. This may create a further unrest in the market. But after certain period of time they adapt to the existing condition and create a niche for themselves. Chen et al., 2020 in their study had categorised the causes of panic buying into four themes – “(1) individuals' perception of the threat of a crisis and the scarcity of products, (2) fear of the unknown which is caused by emotions and uncertainty, (3) coping behaviour which is triggered by control deprivation, and (4) social psychological factors which consider the purchasing behaviour and dynamics of an individual's social network”.

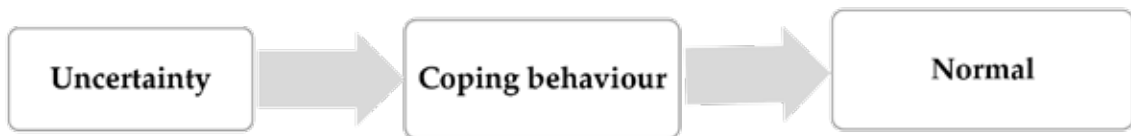
Panic behaviour is identified to be a social phenomenon as well as an individual phenomenon. Social phenomenon can include the structural factors like group behaviour, environmental factors and political influence. Individual phenomenon can include individual's panic perception, level of panic, cost-benefit analysis and calculation of potential impact at individual level. The initial periods of lockdown witnessed a fussy crowd in front of retailers, vegetable vendors and fruit

sellers fearing unavailability in the near future. Eventually, people adapted to the panic situation and started accepting the new normal way of living. The study suggests the concept of panic buying as transitory leaving people to accustom to a particular situation. The study proposes the 'theory of panic buying', that in the scenario of alarm, consumption increases at an increasing rate initially, but with additional units consumed, the panic level declines.

The model indicates the purchase attitude of people, evolving in three stages as described below:

Theory of Panic buying

Figure 1: Model representing the Purchase Attitude



Uncertainty: People always fear the unknown. They always favour conditions to which they are familiar with. But in uncertain conditions always induct fear in them, they are stressed and try ways to avoid the situations. Ignore the impending risk and try searching for a comfort.

Coping behaviour: is an action taken to handle a stressful situation or an unknow situations. This helps to soothe oneself during or after the hostile situation, for example, eating chocolate for comfort in adults.

Normal: Being in a certain condition for too long , people tend to get used the situation and adjust accordingly. This evolves the new buying pattern which is entirely different from the past trends.

Methodology

The questionnaire was mailed to random people within the boundaries of India chosen through the convenience sampling method. There were questions concerning their awareness on Covid-19 and their consumption pattern, especially during the three phases of lockdown in India. The questionnaire was pre-tested on a small sample of potential respondents to identify the problems in the language of the question and formatting before taking the actual official survey. The pilot survey helped in removing two unwanted questions and some technical issues of restricting the number of responses on a single link. After making the required changes, the questionnaire was prepared and was administered to 500 people using internet survey out of which 235 responses were received. On scrutiny of the responses, missing values were ignored, and 233 samples were considered for analysis. Convenience sampling was carried out mainly due to social distancing and contact constraints. Therefore, a more challenging, vast and subjective behavioral point of view could not be adopted. The research concentrated on consumer behavior due to lockdown imposed in India. A five-point Likert scale was used, which requires the respondents to indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement with each of the statements, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Results and Discussion

Consumer Behaviour study generally employs different statistical methods to analyze and interpret the data. The data from 233 respondents is collected using convenience sampling. The composition of the data in terms of its demographics is presented in the following table:

Table 1: Demographics of Respondents

Demographic	Categories	Counts	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female	146	62.7
	Male	87	37.3
Location	Rural	50	21.5
	Urban	183	78.5
Employment Status	Unemployed	70	30.0
	Employed	163	70.0

Correlation between Variables

Five-point Likert scale was used for the study with a set of questions framed regarding consumer behaviour. JAIMOVI software was used for analysis of the data collected. The reliability score of the scale was 0.869, projecting that the variables correlate with each other. A higher reliability score proposes consistency in the results generated (Livingston, 2018). The dependent variables of the study include panic, quantity of purchase, quality of purchase and online purchases. The independent variables include the pandemic situation and the lockdown announcements made.

The results of the study estimate that the panic levels had increased during the first phase of lockdown. By the third lockdown phase, fear decreased as people had got accustomed. Initially, consumers were worried about the availability of the stock, but with time, they gained confidence in the supply of essentials. The initial shock created panic buying, forcing people to hoard food and non-food items. There were also intentions in people to self-isolate themselves, which led to unusual purchases in fear (Hobbs, 2020; Laato, Islam, Farooq, & Dhir, 2020). The long-term impact of voluntary segregation brought about uneasiness and desire to break all the restrictions imposed. Thus, the outlook of people about the lockdown and quarantine restrictions has altered over the period. With the passage of time, the panic levels of consumers have decreased and they do not feel it is essential to over-stock. This reflects people's faith in supply chain management by the Government. On the contrary, this can be observed as the adaptation of people to the new mode of living. The initial worry, distress, anxiety levels had decreased by the time of announcement of the third phase of lockdown.

With thirty percent of the sample being unemployed, there is little bearing on the substitution of high-priced products with low-priced products. The consumers are unwilling to compromise with inferior products during the pandemic. Also, people have not amended their purchase quantity and quality, considering their employment status. Therefore, there is no significant relationship between the employment status and the quality, quantity and substitution levels of purchases. Substitution and quality show a negative relation with the employment status of individuals at Pearson r-value of -0.053 and -0.043. This indicates that consumers were more conscious of the quality, not worrying about the stock availability or are willing to substitute costly products with cheaper products available in the market nearing the end of lockdown third phase.

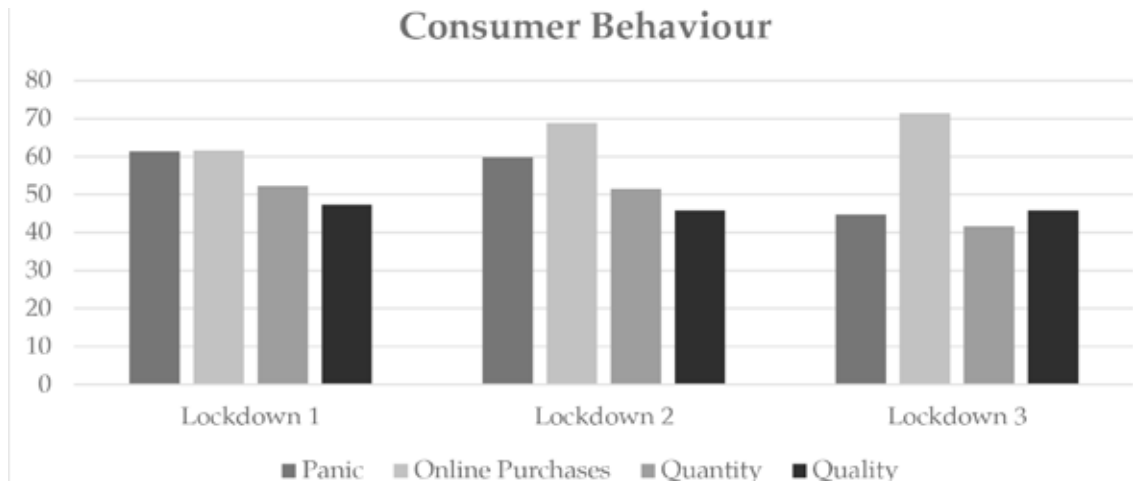
Correlation between Variables

Table 2: Correlation between Employment – Quantity, Quality and Substitution

	Pearson’s R	P-Value
Employment – Substitution	-0.053	0.422
Employment – Quantity	0.09	0.171
Employment – Quality	-0.043	0.512

Even though panic among people decreased, the online platform dependency has increased (Figure 1). The data analysis depicts a precise adaptation to the online purchasing platforms. This might not be the case with those belonging to lower socio-economic background who may face high levels of digital inequalities (Beaunoyer & Dup, 2020). Even though the panic status of consumers are quite alarming projecting how quick human minds adapt to a situation and move ahead with it, the virtual purchase shift is a positive sign on the alertness level among people. On analyzing the quantity of purchases made by people throughout the lockdown, results are directly proportional to the panic levels. That is, the quantity of purchases has reduced from Lockdown 1 to Lockdown 2 and a greater extent to Lockdown 3.

Figure 2: Comparison of Consumer Behaviour during the Lockdown



Panic Change

Table 3: Panic Shift during the Lockdown

Panic	Mean	SD	F	PES
Lockdown 1	61.4	13.7	144**	0.383
Lockdown 2	59.8	11.8		
Lockdown 3	44.8	12.4		

**P < 0.01, Greenhouse Geissers F

Post-Hoc Comparison

Table 4: Post-hoc Comparison of Panic Shift during the Lockdown

Panic	Panic	SD	SE	df	t
Lockdown 1	Lockdown 2	1.53	1.08	464	1.42
	Lockdown 3	16.52	1.08	464	15.36**
Lockdown 2	Lockdown 3	14.99	1.08	464	13.94**

The post-hoc comparison of the phases of lockdown and its impact on panic projects, the difference in varying levels of panic is significant during Lockdown 3. By then, people had been habituated to the pandemic and was little bothered about stock availability. The p-value is significant at Lockdown 1 to Lockdown 3 and Lockdown 2 to Lockdown 3 depicting adaptation to a new normal way of living.

Conclusion

Pandemic elevated the concerns on purchase patterns, household budgets, financial and mental stability. This heightened during the lockdown phases in every country. India is currently in the stage of relaxing the restrictions imposed post five consecutive lockdowns. People in India were aware of the possible 'lockdown', but the announcement was made quick and completely restricting people movements. Medical experts are of the opinion that lockdown was able to reduce the spread of virus.

Though there is not a significant spatial shift in the responses, there is an aggregate effect due to restrictions. The rural customers, who have limited access to the facilities form only a small portion of the respondents for the study. Larger portion of respondents belong to the employed category and also had an option of work from home.

People were initially anxious about food and employment security. But by the third phase of lockdown, people had equipped themselves with virtual platforms both in terms of interaction with family or for office work and grocery and vegetable purchases. The study thus establishes a significant shift in panic level of people. Panic among people has reduced from Lockdown 1 to Lockdown 3, and this sweeping change can also be an indication of the awareness about the virus. Thus, the result is in alignment with the stages identified in the theory of panic buying. People move from initial anxiety and uncertainty towards an accustomed behaviour accepting the adversities. As a positive sign, people were relying on online purchases at a faster pace than expected. Perhaps, availability of online platforms to supply stocks could be one of the major reasons for people not feeling the urgency of stocking up or giving up quality consciousness. People adapted to a new normal way of living; and one of the main indication of this being consumers reluctance to substitute high priced products with low priced products.

Online marketing has gained much importance in the current scenario. The ease of being able to shop at the security and safety of the house has indeed instilled the confidence among customers. However, lack of preparedness among the marketers has resulted in huge losses for them. The resilient nature of people forces them to bounce back to normal as observed from the study. Hence, marketers should be able to take control of the situation and grab this as a beginning of a new era of e-commerce and give a new freshness to the marketing channels.

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